The Effects of Having Official Versus Casual Relationships Between People in the Workplace

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International Business   Abstract

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Subject	The effects of having official versus casual relationships between people in the workplace.	
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This thesis introduces and compares the effects of formal and informal relationships people form in their working environments. The study's primary aim is to determine the kinds of impact on individuals and the organization that can be traced to be caused by interpersonal relationships at work. In addition to learning about the effects, the research aims to conclude whether it makes sense for a manager to facilitate an informal or formal social atmosphere in their company.

Interpersonal relationships and their effects have been researched but not to a great extent. There is broad potential for further research on the issue of social relationships at work, and this thesis focuses on comparing their characteristics and effects. The theoretical framework introduces some major former research related to interpersonal relationships, their different stages, and the impact they could have on individual employees and their organizations.

The research was conducted by interviewing individuals who have experienced having both formal and informal relationships at work. The results were introduced and divided into key themes that occurred in the interviews. In the methodology section, formal and informal interpersonal relationship effects on individuals and organizations were analyzed and compared to determine the benefits and disadvantages of each type of relationship in different situations.

The qualitative analysis found that interpersonal relationships affect organizations and individual employees in various ways, which should not be overlooked. To summarize, based on the findings it would be essential for managers to recognize their strengths and improvement needs in the ways to form healthy relationships with their employees. The findings show that the managers' role in the formation of a healthy workplace atmosphere is important, and they should be equipped to support it together with their employees. The research findings can also help working individuals understand how their interpersonal relationships affect them and their work.

Keywords	Coworkers, workplace relationships, employee well-being, Friendship, Organizational behavior
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Tämä opinnäytetyö esittelee ja vertailee muodollisten ja vapaamuotoisten ihmissuhteiden vaikutuksia työpaikoilla. Tutkimuksen tarkoitus oli määritellä yksittäisiin työntekijöihin ja itse organisaatioon kohdistuvia vaikutuksia, joiden voidaan päätellä olevan kytköksissä yrityksen sisäisiin ihmissuhteisiin. Tämän lisäksi tutkimus pyrki kiteyttämään esihenkilönä työskenteleville, millaisia asioita heidän kannattaisi huomioida työpaikan sisäisissä suhteissa ja millaiseen kollegoiden väliseen ilmapiiriin heidän kannattaisi työntekijöitään kannustaa.

Kollegoiden välisten suhteiden vaikutuksia on aikaisemmin tutkittu suhteellisen vähän. Etenkään muodollisten ja vapaamuotoisten työpaikan sisäisten suhteiden vertailua on olemassa rajallisesti. Opinnäytetyön tekijä korostaakin, että aiheessa on paljon potentiaalia tulevalle tutkimukselle. Tämä opinnäytetyö esittelee merkittäviä aiempia aiheeseen liittyviä tutkimuksia työpaikan sosiaalisista suhteista. Työssä käsitellään kollegoiden välisten ihmissuhteiden erilaisia tasoja, sekä vaikutuksia, joita näillä eritasoisilla ihmissuhteilla voi olla yksilöihin ja yritykseen.

Opinnäytetyön tekijän laatimien haastatteluihin perustuvan aineiston perusteella tutkimusosassa kootaan, analysoidaan, ja vertaillaan työelämässä havaittuja työpaikan sisäisten suhteiden vaikutuksia. Tutkimusmetodina käytettiin anonyymejä haastatteluja työelämässä olevilta henkilöiltä, joilla on kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä sekä muodollisista että vapaamuotoisista suhteista työpaikalla. Teemahaastatteluilla kerätty aineisto jaettiin usein haastatteluissa esille tulleisiin aihealueisiin.

Laadullisessa tutkimuksessa pystyttiin päättelemään, että työpaikan sisäiset ihmissuhteet vaikuttavat monilla tavoin sekä yksittäisiin työntekijöihin että yritykseen. Tulosten perusteella, olisi tärkeää että esihenkilöt osaisivat tunnistaa kehityskohteita ja vahvuuksia tavoissaan luoda terveellä pohjalla olevia suhteita alaisiinsa. Ennen kaikkea esihenkilön olisi hyvä tunnistaa yrityksen sisäisten ihmissuhteiden moninaiset vaikutukset ja tukea tilanteeseen sopivan työilmapiirin luomista yhdessä alaisten kanssa. Tulokset voivat myös auttaa työyhteisöjen jäseniä tunnistamaan miten ihmissuhteet kollegoihin mahdollisesti vaikuttavat heihin ja heidän työhönsä.

Avainsanat	Kollegat, työelämän suhteet, organisaatiokäyttäytyminen, esimies-alaissuhde, ystävyys
Sivut	43 sivua ja liitteitä 3 sivua

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1 Introduction

Unless a person is self-employed or working independently, coworkers are a part of everyday work. Due to their presence, the relationships the workers have with their peers and leaders can affect several aspects of the working life and the outcomes of the work, just like the relationships outside the workplace do.

This thesis compares informal and formal workplace relationships and concludes with their benefits and challenges. The goal is to find out what kind of effects formal or informal relationships have on an organization and its employees and how an employer could use this information to help create the desired working atmosphere in their organization.

The research question, which outlines the topic of this thesis, is: What are the effects of having official versus casual relationships between people in the workplace?

So far, there has been relatively little research about how people's relationships in a workplace affect the employees and the organization they work for. However, the topic has drawn more attention around itself, also very recently. Working life has had enormous changes from what it used to be, and many would argue that coworkers are why work is worth doing.

On the other hand, it cannot be said that having informal relationships among colleagues is only beneficial. It is also essential to consider why sometimes it would be more favorable to keep interaction at work formal and professional. (Percy, 2021)

This thesis finds and compares the benefits and disadvantages of formal and informal workplace relationships. In the theoretical framework, the definitions around the topic of workplace relationships are explained. Further in the theoretical framework, some of the considerable former studies and other material about the subject are discussed to determine what kind of effects of workplace relationships have already been discovered.

The methodology section of this thesis analyzes the beneficial and adverse impacts of workplace relationships. The data of the research part is collected by interviewing people from a variety of fields and different job titles. The research consists of semi-structured interviews with people who have diverse and comprehensive perspectives on the topic. With this qualitative research method, the author finds out about the experiences the interviewees had about formal and informal relationships and their impact during their career.

The interview data is analyzed thematically to focus on the key topics which came up during the interviews. Moreover, the results are contrasted with some of the major former research to determine the similarities and differences compared to this research. Lastly, in the discussion section the key findings are presented by connecting the former theoretical knowledge and the author's research.

2   Theoretical Framework

Workplace relationships are still relatively narrowly researched topic. The earlier major research has had a focus on relationships between people from different levels of hierarchy. However, in around the past 25 years the amount of research focusing on broader scale of coworker relationships and their effects has become more present. In this chapter the essential terms around workplace relationships are defined and the typical characteristics of different types of workplace relationships are identified. After that, theoretical framework also introduces how other researchers find workplace relationships connecting to different aspects of work and the people of the organization.

2.1   Formal relationships at work

According to Morrison, formal relationships at the workplace have been researched more than informal ones, at least by the time of her research in 2005. She defined formal workplace relationships as non-voluntary relationships that the organization prescribes. She also uses the term "organizational relationship" when talking about formal relationships, and with this, she refers to relationships between superior and subordinate or a mentor and

mentee. These relationships are more likely to stay formal and lack the voluntary characteristics of friendship. (Morrison, 2005, pp. 15,26)

2.2 Informal relationships at work

Informal workplace relationships are friendships formed at work with a coworker or sometimes superior. In this thesis, they are referred to as informal relationships or friendships. The upcoming subchapter will discuss informal relationships from different researchers' points of view by first defining them and briefly differentiating them from formal relationships. This subchapter will also discuss what kind of friendship functions has former research around the topic been able to identify.

2.3 Different stages of relationships in a workplace context

This chapter introduces different stages of coworker relationships and discusses their characteristics. The author acknowledges that it is impossible to draw a clear line between different stages of relationships since they differ for everyone. Therefore, the steps discussed in this chapter are directive and have many intermediate forms that could fulfill the characteristics of each other.

The first stage of getting to know a new person at work is called information peer in this chapter, but elsewhere in this thesis, it will be referred to as a formal workplace relationship. The author finds that informational peer description only fits the characteristics of formal workplace relationships yet thinks that relationships can still be considered formal while having characteristics of the further stages.

2.3.1 Information peer

Coworkers whose communication primarily consists of information sharing can be called information peers. The primary function of this relationship is to exchange information about their work and company-related matters. These relationships are shallow and often have low levels of self-disclosure and trust. These coworkers might occasionally give each

other small work-related feedback, but they have little confidence to go personal in their feedback or other communication sharing. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

Information peer is a prevalent form of relationship at the workplace, and an individual likely has many of them. Although these relationships stay shallow, they can be essential to maintain and should not be underappreciated. It would be difficult for individuals to sustain multiple deeper-level relationships in their lives, which is not how it should be anyway. Some relationships are meant to stay shallow, which does not mean they are bad. These kinds of relationships have their purpose. Having coworkers with whom a person mainly shares work-related information can positively affect the work itself. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

In the late nineties, Odden and Sias referred to informational peers as a negative outcome and described it as too superficial a workplace relationship. (Odden & Sias, 1997, p. 5)

2.3.2   From Peer to a Friend

As discussed, informational peers are the coworkers an individual is likely to have. Some of these peer relationships stay formal and contact with these coworkers remains work-related and infrequent. However, there are these few people an employee might become friends with. This subchapter introduces how research says it could happen.

Sias and Cahill researched how friendships at the workplace are developing. Their research uses the term coworker or acquaintance for a peer that is still just a person with whom an employee would occasionally exchange work-related information, a formal coworker relationship. According to Sias and Cahill, there are three transitions: from coworker to friend, friend to close friend, and finally from a close friend to almost best friend. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, pp. 12-14)

The research stated that the first transition that coworker to friend transition is perceived to be a result of mainly contextual factors. These factors are mostly not related to the individuals themselves or their characteristics. Working closely and frequently together or sharing projects are common forms of proximity that often bring the first depth to a peer relationship. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 12)

After being in proximity to one another for some time, coworkers find common ground while speaking. Having something in common takes communication outside of work and task-related matters. Coworkers may, for example, find out that they share similar values or hobbies, and the conversation starts to flow from these similarities. During the transition, the communication becomes broader but stays relatively superficial. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, pp. 14-15)

When coworkers have worked in proximity together, they may start spending time together in situations where they are not obligated by the work to do so. This additional socializing in the organizational context may consist of going for lunch or getting drinks together after work. In the study, Sias and Cahill found out from the responders that spending "slack" time with a coworker may be one potential turning point when acquaintances turn into friends. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 14)

Do you think that eating lunch together with other employees is an opportunity to strengthen private bonds?

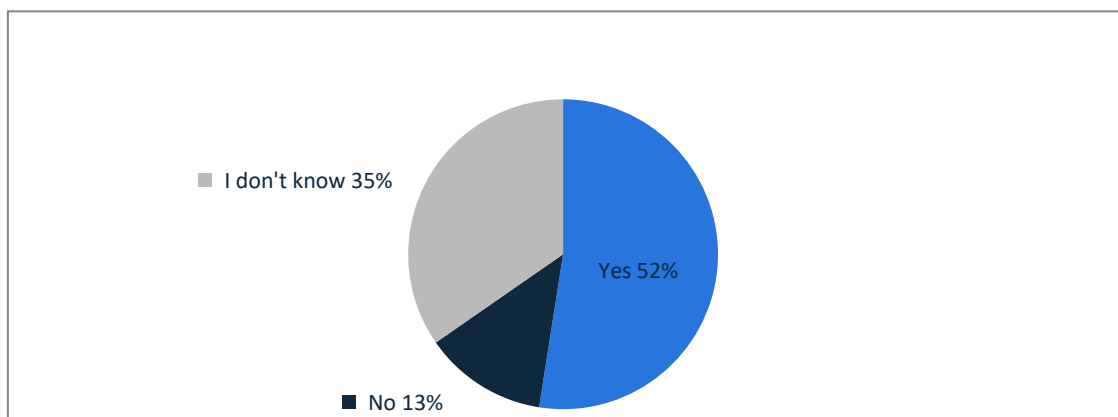Figure 1: Opinions on joint lunchtime's influence on private bonding at work in Poland 2019 (Pracuj, 2019)

The findings of Sias and Cahill are somewhat supported by Pracuj's more recent survey results. To say the least, only a clear minority of the respondents found that eating lunch together would not be an opportunity to strengthen private bonds with coworkers. The survey results are illustrated above. (Pracuj, 2019)

2.3.3 Collegial peer

Collegial peer is the type of relationship in a workplace where individuals have a tad more trust and openness. These relationships are more relaxed, and more relationship-related functions affect working life. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

In addition to work-related information sharing, collegial peers give each other more emotional support, are more open to providing feedback, and receive more emotional confirmation from the relationship. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

This study shows individuals may have around two to four collegial peer relationships. These relationships are often formed when coworkers work in the same department or frequently work together. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

Collegial peers meet the characteristics of friendship. They are comfortable enough to share how they are doing at work and in their personal life. They trust each other and start conversations that are also non-work-related. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 12)

2.3.4 Reaching Deeper Relationship with a Coworker

People spend a significant amount of their time at work and, therefore, among their coworkers. It is no wonder that some friends at the workplace might become a dear and essential part of an individual's life. Sometimes, these people become one's best friends, and it would not be easy to imagine a life without them. Here is how this kind of solid bond may form in a workplace.

There is a tendency for coworkers to become close when they have gone through something challenging. Since contact with coworkers is frequent, they will see many good and bad days in each other's life. One might experience difficult or stressful times in their personal life. The coworker can be the support that helps a struggling friend cope. Some struggles might be related to a career or the organization they work for. If there is a superior or another coworker causing a hard time, having friends at work offer the kind of support that not many others can. Therefore, a friend who works in the same organization can relate to the

situation and may have the best insights into dealing with the issue. Knowing that the coworker is there for you during the hard times makes them valuable. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 15)

The amount and the nature of the socializing changes when coworkers start getting closer. Instead of only having lunch together, they may now have holidays together. The nature of the friendship is more intimate, and it is likely that the coworker is now a part of the personal life. They know each other's families and friends from other than working context. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, p. 15)

Having something in common also furthers the development of deeper friendships at work. It could be that coworker friends start hobbies together, giving them a reason to spend time frequently outside work. Coworkers may find a way to relate to each other, for example, by becoming parents simultaneously or in different ways connecting as families, rather than only as individuals. (Sias & Cahill, 1998, pp. 15-16)

2.3.5   Special Peers

Kram and Isabella call the most intimate form of coworker relationship as a special peer. Coworkers with this kind of relationship are so comfortable with each other that they can truly express themselves when together. They know they can count on each other and trust that they will not be judged by one another. This allows an individual to have someone to support and understand when facing difficult things at work and in personal life. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 13)

As the name may already indicate, special peers, are rare. An individual might have either a few or none of them. It is typical for them to take a few years to develop from collegial peer relationships. They are solid and can endure hard times like changes and transitions by their nature. If an individual has a coworker relationship like this, they will likely experience a sense of security and comfort. This relationship can create a strong sense of belongingness in the workplace. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 13-14, 16)

2.4   Benefits of informal relationships at work

It has been discovered that having friendships at work should be considered significantly important. Yet, there has not been that much research about them over the years. In the mid-eighties, Kram and Isabella made an interview study with 25 pairs of people working together and were also friends. They found that having a coworker with whom a person has a friendship could have benefits comparable to the perks of a mentor relationship. Their study suggested that peer relationships could offer personal and professional growth opportunities. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 2,5)

Before their study, mentoring was considered the primary way of helping employees achieve personal growth and enhance career progression opportunities. The study of Kram and Isabella took an approach to assume that regular coworker relationships might also be developmental. They found it interesting that coworker relationships could have similar benefits as mentor or leader relationships, and they are most likely more accessible to all employees. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 2,4)

The purpose of the study was to find out why employees form and maintain relationships with their coworkers, the nature of these relationships, and finally, the kinds of functions these coworker relationships could have in different career stages. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 4)

As mentioned earlier, the study found that relationships with coworkers work as an alternative to established relationships with mentors. Additionally, they found out that this applies to all career stages. Depending on the coworker relationship, the amount of career-enhancing and psychological functions that affected the people in the study varied. Based on these results, Kram and Isabella presented speculations on how the stage of career and age would affect the relationships at the workplace. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 8)

The results suggested that coworker relationships could affect one's career positively. They found that open information sharing between coworkers, joint talks about career strategies, and feedback between coworkers who are comfortable enough to give it can be considered career-enhancing factors of coworker relationships. Coworkers can be a vital source for an

individual to learn about themselves. The study suggested that individuals reflect their effects on the organization, leadership style, and work and life balance through their coworkers. These effects could be considered as similar to the impact achieved by mentoring. Still, the study found that in comparison, the critical value of the coworker relationships, which differentiates them from mentoring, is their potential to last for a more extended period. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 9-10)

Coworker relationships could give individuals a better sense of competence and confidence in their professional roles. Coworkers support each other emotionally, and the relationships could turn into meaningful friendships that also take place outside the workplace. They are there for each other during the transitions or other stressful times by listening and counseling. The aspect that could positively differentiate workplace relationships from other relationships is that coworkers share the mutual experience of the work itself. They automatically meet or stay in contact frequently and work towards the same goals in the workplace. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 9-10)

A more recent study from Sweden investigated the health effects of coworker relationships by surveying nursing home staff throughout a Swedish municipality. The research found strong correlations between self-rated health and positive experience in workplace relationships. In addition, they found that having enhanced relationships with managers was also a factor that positively affected employees' self-rated health. (Schön Persson, Nilsson Lindström, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2018, p. 7)

A study that monitored coworker satisfaction and its daily effects found that being satisfied with coworkers positively impacts general life satisfaction. Organizational behavior scholars have urged a greater focus on interpersonal relationships at work. (Halvorsen-Ganepola, Judge, & Simon, 2010, p. 1)

In a 2010 survey, Rath and Harter found that six hours of social time a day significantly benefits individuals' well-being and reduces stress. Since many people spend a prominent share of their time at work, socialization at the workplace plays a major role to fulfill their daily socialization needs. The survey was partaken by people with varying personality types

and the positive effects of daily socialization were found in both introverted and outgoing people. (Rath & Harter, 2010)

Rath and Harter also found out that having a best friend at work has even more substantial positive work-related outcomes. The major positive outcomes were increased job engagement, higher quality results, and higher overall well-being. They add that to achieve the benefits of work best friends, it is not required for the individuals to work on related tasks or to even work in the same location. (Rath & Harter, 2010)

The author equates work best friends to special peers described by Kram and Isabella. They, as well as Rath and Harter, have found that this type of relationship is rare and only around 30 percent of people have them. However, given the results of the survey having special peers brings remarkable benefits for both the organization and the individuals.

2.5   Workplace relationships and technological technology-reliant communication

Quan-Haase and Wellman challenged the findings of Sias and Cahill when they studied how reliant employees in virtually connected organizations are in computer-mediated communication, even when they had a chance for face-to-face interaction. (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004, p. 14; Sias & Cahill, 1998, pp. 14-15)

While Sias and Cahill emphasize the importance of physical proximity between colleagues to allow informal workplace relationship formation, Quan-Haase and Wellman suggest that physical proximity is not a such significant factor in the advancement of colleague friendships. (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004, p. 14; Sias & Cahill, 1998, pp. 14-15)

2.6   The need of reciprocity in coworker relationships

Like in all friendships, it is essential to note that informal relationships in a workplace often need reciprocity to stay functional. Reciprocity means the mutual exchange of favors, support, or social interaction. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 1)

Odden and Sias mentioned that informational peer relationships, also called formal relationships, lack reciprocity. They concluded that it is unlikely for these relationships to turn into friendships if the interchange between colleagues is unbalanced or non-existent. (Odden & Sias, 1997, p. 5)

If a person gains much less help or support than they are giving to their coworker, it may lead to negative feelings on both sides. In a working context, this may appear as a feeling of being unable to return the favor or fear of appearing incompetent as the person who gets much more than gives. On the other hand, the other person doing more favors may feel frustrated towards the person who puts on significantly less input. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 2)

This research found that the need for balanced reciprocity only applies to coworkers who work in the same or similar level positions. This means there is no need for an equal balance between a superior and a subordinate. The researchers asked their survey employees if they think there is reciprocity between them and their coworkers and if it also applies to their superiors. The responses indicated that most (77.6 %) employees felt they had reciprocity between themselves and their coworkers. Around half (57.7 %) thought they had reciprocity with their superiors. Since the managers are not as often considered friends as coworkers, the relationship is formal, and reciprocity is not as expected as in friendship. It is more common that the superiors provide more support to their subordinates than they receive, and it does not harm the formal relationship between them. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 4)

The author acknowledges that the research discussed above was conducted almost 30 years ago. While many aspects of social psychology remain similar and older theories can be applied to many phenomena happening today, it is necessary to consider that the leadership styles and the power distance between superiors and subordinates may have changed. This, of course, does not apply to all countries, fields of work, or workplaces. Furthermore, later in this thesis, it is discussed whether it is more common to have an informal relationship with a superior nowadays and if it has brought some benefits or challenges in a working context.

Buunk, Doosje, Jans, and Hopstaken suggest that as another factor, the need for reciprocity can also be based on individual differences. According to their research, personal preferences in giving and receiving coworker support can affect whether the support has negative or positive consequences on individuals. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 10)

They found that depending on preferences, the amount individuals perceive reciprocity in their relationships at work varies. An imbalance in received exchange can cause negative feelings. Moreover, even the received coworker support can stress individuals if they feel like they receive more support than they are comfortable giving. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 10)

Based on the studies above, the author finds that the complexity of individual preferences of reciprocity could complicate the job of a superior as a facilitator of a positive workplace atmosphere. Since it cannot always be simplified and said that employees want to give and receive similar amounts of support from each other just because they are peers, it is not clear to a superior how they should encourage their employees to act.

However, it is also possible that this mainly requires the superior to give space and support employees in finding the optimal way. This would need the superior to be a skilled observer and to determine when they should and should not interfere in the relationships between their employees.

2.7   The effects of coworker relationships versus superior relationships

In 2010, Halvorsen-Gaenpola, Judge, and Simon discussed in their study that it is difficult to determine if the people who participated in the survey were strictly evaluating the aspects that could be related to their peers, meaning the people who work at a similar level position as them and they are not their superiors or subordinates. This makes studying the effects of coworker relationships challenging since the employees might experience their peers differently. As discussed in the study above, superior relationships likely have different dynamics than coworkers' relationships. (Halvorsen-Ganepola, Judge, & Simon, 2010, p. 11)

Ng and Sorensen studied and compared the effects of perceived supervisor and coworker support. The interesting finding in their meta-analysis results was that superiors are seen as the company's representatives, so supervisor relationships are more tied to organizational outcomes like job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions than coworker relationships. (Ng & Sorensen, 2008)

This finding challenges the former studies, which have connected job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions with coworkers in similar levels of positions, known as peers. This could indicate that in the relatively small number of existing studies of coworker relationship effects, there might be some blurred lines between the effects caused by superior relationships and the effects caused by coworker relationships. Based on the studies observed in this thesis, there can be some differences in the effects caused by superiors when compared to coworkers since the relationship functions vary. The differences in needs for reciprocity are different.

In 2002 study Berman, West and Richter researched managers' opinions about workplace friendships. While a majority (76.4 %) of the managers attending the study approved of friendships among peers, only 47.7 % approved of friendships between superiors and subordinates. (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002, p. 5)

The managers who attended the survey found that the key benefits of coworker friendships are improved communication, coworker support and an improved workplace atmosphere. In addition, many of the survey respondents found that coworker friendships could foster better working relationships, improve effectiveness in teams and create a sense of purpose. Some of them also stated that coworker friends could help individuals in career advancement and that having workplace friends are a great enjoyable part of work and have no harm. (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002, p. 6)

2.8   Conflicts among people at workplace

In 2000, Frone developed a model of interpersonal conflict at work and tested it with a group of young workers. His model supported Ng's and Sorensen's study, finding that

conflicts with a superior affect psychological outcomes that are more organizationally relevant: job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover intentions. Author's recreation of Frone's model figure is shown below. (Frone, 2000, p. 3)
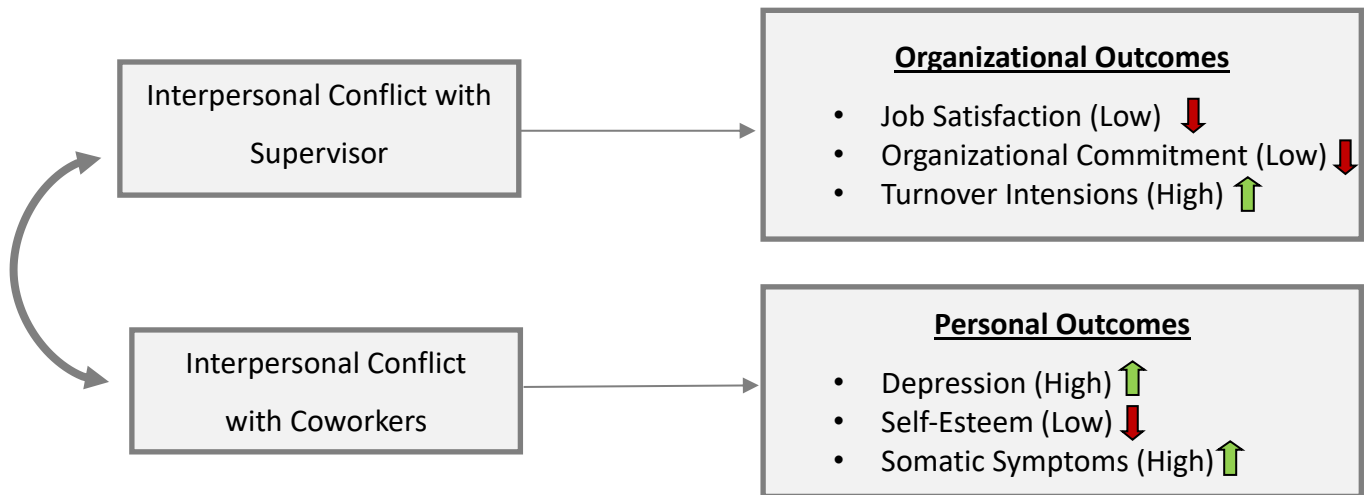

Figure 2: Conceptual model of interpersonal conflict at work and psychological outcomes. [Recreated by the author from Frone's illustration] (Frone, 2000, p. 3)

When Frone was doing his research, he applied Alan Fiske's Relational Model Theory to classify the relationships he was studying. To clarify Frone's research findings, the two models from Alan Fiske's theory need to be briefly explained.

Alan Fiske's Relational Model Theory (RMT) is used to understand, motivate, and evaluate social structures and relationships. The theory consists of four elementary models: Communal Sharing, Authority Ranking, Equality Matching, and Market Pricing. (Fiske, 2015)

In Frone's research, coworker relationships were identified to fit into Communal Sharing (CS) model. The Communal Sharing model means a group of people who are not differentiated from each other. The people do not have different hierarchy levels, and typically they share something in common. (Fiske, 2015)

As discussed earlier, coworkers are people who work in the same organization, and none of them are each other's superiors or subordinates. Frone explains how Fiske's Communal Sharing model connects to his research; conflicts between coworkers are likely to cause adverse personal-psychological outcomes. These adverse effects can be increased feelings of

depression and even somatic symptoms. It can also affect self-esteem negatively. (Frone, 2000, p. 7)

These effects have a high likelihood in coworker conflict situations because people in a Communal Sharing dynamic like the people who are similar or have something in common with them and want to be liked by them. When there is a conflict with a peer, an employee might experience a decrease in their sense of self and similarity with others. (Frone, 2000, p. 2)

Frone's research results indicated that having conflict with a superior would lead to these adverse organizational outcomes because the employee's relationship with their superior is based on an Authority Ranking model (AR). (Frone, 2000, p. 7)

Authority Ranking model's essential idea is an asymmetry in the social relationship. Those higher in the hierarchy have a role in directing the subordinates' activities. At the same time, they also function as "protecting and providing" for those lower in the hierarchy. (Fiske, 2015)

In other words, conflict with the superior will likely cause conflict with the company. The experiences of the people who attended the study indicated that job satisfaction and organizational commitment were decreased, and intentions to quit the job increased because of the conflict. (Frone, 2000, p. 7)

Because of the hierarchical setting between subordinates and their superiors, the subordinate is not likely to experience adverse personal-psychological outcomes in conflict situations. Since the superior acts as an agent of the organization, the employee does not reflect the negative feelings in a similar way they do in a conflict with a peer. In coworker conflict, the employee becomes hurt because someone similar, sharing things in common with them, is hurt. In a superior-subordinate conflict, the employee does not reflect their adverse outcomes. Instead, they direct the consequences to the company by feeling less satisfied with their job, becoming less committed, and developing turnover intentions. (Frone, 2000, pp. 2,7)

2.9 Coworker relationships and stress

Based on more recent information, the author finds that many of the adverse effects mentioned by Frone have similarities to the symptoms of stress. According to World Health Organization, mental stress symptoms include lack of ability to focus, sleep difficulties, sadness and crying, tiredness, anger issues, and other diverse mental effects. (World Health Organization, 2020, p. 14)

If a person is experiencing high stress, they may also experience diverse physical symptoms such as headaches, tensity and muscle pain, stomach problems, and pressure on the chest. (World Health Organization, 2020, pp. 13-14)

Stress is experienced by a significant amount of people all around the world. According to Gallup Inc., 44% of employees globally and 39% in Europe have stress daily. The issue is widespread, and it is essential for employers to acknowledge the reasons and consequences behind it. (Gallup, Inc., 2022, pp. 13,43)

In the infographic below, it is shown that stress is visibly the biggest threat to health in a workplace followed by bullying/harassment and overwork. (Armstrong, 2016)

Figure 3: Stress is biggest threat to workplace health (Armstrong, 2016 [Statista])

2.10 Coworker relationship deterioration

When a relationship is deteriorating, it is progressively becoming worse. Often, when a workplace relationship deteriorates, it is possible that these peers still must continue working together. It can be said that there is pressure to stay on good terms with coworkers. (Perry & Sias, 2004, p. 3)

The author finds that this could be one of the biggest risks when the relationships in a workplace get personal. If people run into personal level drama, it can be very difficult to not let the personal relationship deterioration to affect the work and the general social atmosphere.

3   Methodology

This research aim is to find out and compare the effects of formal and informal relationships in the workplace. The research question is: What are the effects of having official versus casual relationships between people in the workplace? When the research has a how-question, the results are expected to be descriptive rather than numerical.

In-depth answers from selected people with broad views about the topic allow rich data collection. This data helps to answer the research question and, therefore, potentially helps employers and employees reflect on the results of their work and be more aware of the effects of their relationships with their coworkers.

3.1   Framework of the research

The research was conducted through interviews with five selected people with comprehensive experience of the topic. The interview candidates were picked based on whether they have worked in environments involving socialization with coworkers. Furthermore, the author found it essential that the interviewees had experience and understanding of both formal and informal social working environments.

The interviewees have experience in diverse job titles and social atmospheres at work. The goal was to learn about the experiences of people who have developed relationships with their coworkers. and have possibly witnessed the effects of coworker relationships from a manager's point of view.

To gain data from diverse perspectives, the author wanted to interview people from different age groups, career backgrounds, and types of current positions. Two interviewees were from 20 to 29 years, and the other two were from the age group of 30 to 60 years.

The reason to interview chosen individuals for the research was the type of data the author wanted to acquire. The author wanted to understand how relationships between coworkers affect aspects such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and stress. Moreover, interviews served the interest of the study by giving space for new themes that were not introduced in previous studies. The author wanted to acquire more knowledge of the modern effects of social relationships at work and to find out if some of the effects introduced in older studies are brought up by the interviewees.

3.2   Data Processing

The collected research data consists of the personal experiences the interviewees have had or the observations they have made during their career. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the interviews were conducted anonymously. Since the aim of the research was to gain insights into the effects of different kinds of social relationships at work, it is necessary to make sure that the interviewees do not have to fear that they or their organizations could be recognized from the research data.

The interviews were recorded by the author and all the interviewees were informed about it before attending the interview. Every interviewee was asked for their consent to the of recording the interviews and if the recorded conversation during the interview could be used as data for the author's bachelor thesis.
The recordings of the interviews are only accessible by the author of this thesis and once the research work is finalized and evaluated the author deletes the recordings.

To make sure the interviewees and their current or former organizations remain unrecognizable, the author calls them simply interviewees with a number to differentiate them from each other. For example, the first person interviewed is called interviewee 1. Furthermore, recognizable information about the interviewees' current or former organizations or positions is not disclosed. The interviewees' job background is introduced by the professional field and the amount of work experience. Every interviewee's data is presented with the same level of anonymization.

4   Results

The author found several reoccurring themes in the interviewees' responses by looking into the data gathered from the interviews. All the following topics were somehow emphasized by all or most of the interviewees. Especially the role of the superiors and their contributions to the social atmosphere at work brought up several thoughts. Firstly, to compare the effects, the author summarized the scenarios where interviewees thought informality and being friends with coworkers is beneficial. Followed by that, based on interviewees' experiences, the scenarios where formality has or would have been more beneficial.

4.1   Reasons to prefer informality in workplace relationships

The interviewees were asked what type of relationships they have experienced in their current or past jobs. Every interviewee had experienced both formal and informal relationships with their colleagues and therefore they were asked to think of and compare the effects of each type. As a follow-up question, the author asked about the interviewees' preferences on whether they prefer formal or informal relationships at work. The discussions with the interviewees revealed that the preferences were very dependent on the situation. However, all the interviewees stated that informal relationships work best with peers. Here are some other positive findings of informal relationships made by the interviewees.

Interviewee 2 has experience in several positions in a major globally operating company. During their time in this current position, they ultimately prefer informal workplace relationships and said they have significant benefits. When they compared formal and

informal social environments at work, they said that informal social relationships are the good ones. They even said that they do not see any benefits in formal workplace relationships. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

The view interviewee 2 has on formal relationships supports the findings of Odden and Sias, who stated that formal workplace relationships, also called informal peers are not the desired outcome. (Odden & Sias, 1997, p. 5)

When discussing the benefits of informal relationships, interviewee 2 said they experience boosted mood and performance when their relationships with coworkers have more dimensions than work-related matters. They find that being surrounded by motivated and passionate friends at work increases their productivity. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

In addition, they think it is valuable to know coworkers personally because it allows everyone to be more compassionate and understanding towards each other. They also said that close coworkers are exceptional support for work-related matters especially. For example, in problematic situations at work, a close coworker has the best understanding of what is happening, which no one outside the work could have. Therefore, they also can help get through these kinds of challenges. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

Interviewee 5 comes from a culture where addressing superiors in a formal manner is usual. experience working in a medium-sized private sector company in several departments including marketing, human resource management, and quality management. Their current position is in a taxation department of a governmental organization. They say that not all their superiors expect the formal addressing and interviewee 5 feels that being this formal creates a barrier between the employees and superiors. The conversations feel forced and are often kept short. Interviewee 5 mentions that they do not address their direct supervisor formally and that it is easier to communicate with this supervisor. However, they say that the communication between them and the supervisor is mostly not work-related and therefore they think it does not have benefits for their work directly. (Interview 5, 17.6.2022)

The author finds that based on what interviewee 5 said, speaking to a supervisor in an informal manner may not always increase the information sharing about work-related issues. The positive effects of informal communication might not be directly tied to the performance but rather to the well-being of the employees. Interviewee 5 said that they feel more relaxed talking to the supervisor whom they do not address formally, compared to the superiors whom they address formally. (Interview 5, 17.6.2022)

Interviewee 3 has the longest career and according to their experiences, they would say social relationships at work positively affect productivity and individuals' well-being. As an example of workers' well-being benefits, they said that having friendly atmosphere at work can help with stress and could even reduce the amount of needed sick leaves. They think that having informal relationships at work benefits individuals and the organization. Furthermore, they say that the benefits of formal relationships are not likely to exceed the benefits of informal relationships at work. Regarding relationships with peers and people in the same team, they prefer having informal and open relationships since it makes the work less complicated, improves individuals' well-being, and makes them feel more comfortable at work. (Interview 3, 4.5.2022)

Interviewee 3's view supports the findings of Kram and Isabella in the study where they researched whether friendships with colleagues could have benefits in the same way as mentorships at the workplace do. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p. 11)

Interviewee 3 also gave an example of a former workplace, where being informal and having a relaxed atmosphere was especially essential. The job required an environment where the well-being of everyone and a positive atmosphere were necessities since their customers needed relaxed and cheerful surroundings. Moreover, interviewee 3 was wondering why this way to encourage a positive working atmosphere would not be used everywhere since it had a very positive impact on everyone who worked there and allowed them to build lifelong friendships. (Interview 3, 4.5.2022)

Interviewee 1's early career positions consisted of customer service jobs where they worked either alone or as a pair with their colleague. Later in their career, they worked in positions where they would interact with several colleagues every day. Their most recent position is a

leadership position, so they also have a perspective on how relationships with colleagues and subordinates affect different aspects of work. The author asked them how it is to work with a pair and spend whole days with this colleague. They mentioned that their relationship with the pair was a very informal and close friendship. They said that working closely with a colleague was especially lovely. They felt that their coworker relationship with the pair positively affected their motivation and excitement to go to work. They said they even felt competitive toward their colleague while simultaneously performing the same tasks. This positive competition caused them to remain excited and highly motivated in their work. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 4 was asked to give an example of a situation where friends at work are especially important to them. They said that having casual relationships with coworkers affects their work directly, especially when someone at work is on holiday, and their tasks need to be done. In these high-stress situations, where there are sometimes excessive amounts of work to be done, they feel that it is significantly easier to ask for help from coworkers they are friends with than those with whom they are more formal. They think they would probably drown in work during busy times if they only had formal terms with colleagues because there is not enough confidence to ask for help, even when they needed it. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

Interviewee 1 talked about their experiences of isolation at work after they got promoted as manager. Their relationships with colleagues in customer service were overall friendly in spirit but they defined them to be formal and shallow. They said that since many workplace relationships turned distant quickly, they think that the shift would have been mentally challenging for them without their formed friendships with other managers. They said they could imagine that without the support of these manager friends, it could have been too demanding and lonely for them to take this leap in their career. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1's experience in career progression was stressful and they found it essential that they had peers among other managers who they were able to rely on during the difficult times of starting in a higher position. Even though during the earlier stages of their employment, they felt that these formal and seamless relationships were very well-functioning and suitable for the time, they now feel different in their current position as a

manager. They said that it makes them happy that they get to share their experiences and give support to each other at work. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 said friendships with other managers have also extended to free time. They are in frequent contact outside work as well. They say that it is not needed to have free time friendships with colleagues, but they have felt that allowing these colleagues to access and be part of their personal lives has its benefits. They gave an example of how being open with friends at work feels safe, and since these colleagues know about their personal life, their reactions to issues are empathetic and supportive. They also said having a friend at work to speak openly about work-related topics can be essential since they might not even be allowed to talk about work-related matters to anyone outside work. Otherwise, they would have to keep these things to themselves. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 2 supported this by saying that close coworkers are exceptional support for work-related matters especially. For example, in problematic situations at work, a close coworker has the best understanding of what is happening, which no one outside the work could have. Therefore, they also can help get through these kinds of challenges. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

Interviewee 4 highlighted the importance of friendships at work and said they make them more comfortable at work. They emphasized that is the communication with colleagues with more informal relationships is vital and makes the job much more convenient. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

In the illustration below, the author has collected the main benefits of informal relationships at the workplace. The effects on employees are listed on the left and the effects on the organization are listed on the right.
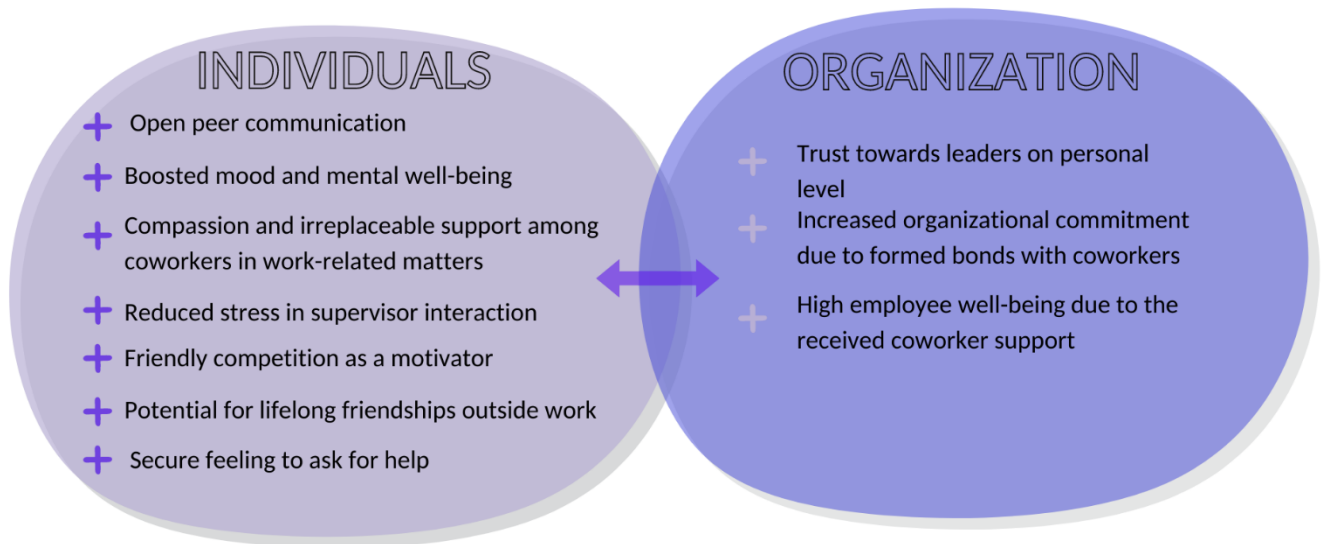

INDIVIDUALS

- Open peer communication
- Boosted mood and mental well-being
- Compassion and irreplaceable support among coworkers in work-related matters
- Reduced stress in supervisor interaction
- Friendly competition as a motivator
- Potential for lifelong friendships outside work
- Secure feeling to ask for help

ORGANIZATION

- Trust towards leaders on personal level
- Increased organizational commitment due to formed bonds with coworkers
- High employee well-being due to the received coworker support

Figure 4: summarized benefits of informal workplace relationships based on interviewees findings [Author's own illustration]

4.2   Reasons to prefer formality in workplace relationships

Overall, the discussions during the interviews stated that certain situations in which formality in workplace relationships would be beneficial. However, none of the interviewees said they would strictly prefer formal relationships at work.

In most cases, all interviewees agreed that it makes sense to keep a certain level of formality between a supervisor and a subordinate. This was found to have benefits for both parties. Besides the distance that would be good to keep between supervisors and subordinates, interviewees 2, 3, and 4 did not find that there are different situations where formality in workplace relationships would make more sense than informality. (Interviews 1,2,3,4,5)

When interviewee 1 worked in customer service, they felt that the social atmosphere was positive, and generally, everyone came along very effortlessly. They described that the relationships with coworkers were positive yet relatively formal. They mentioned that the formality of these relationships was possibly why the social atmosphere was generally positive and effortless. The formality of these relationships was because customer service workers did not actively work together and therefore did not form deep personal relationships with each other. The interviewee felt these professional relationships were functional and drama free for that time and circumstances. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewees 3 and 5 share similar experiences and stated that due to the independent nature of their work tasks, they had not experienced a need to connect with their coworkers on a personal level. (Interviews 3 and 5)

Interviewee 1 works as a manager and views the topic from the superior's perspective. They point out that they prefer to keep a certain distance from their subordinates and would not generally choose to spend overly casual free time with them. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

They want to keep a distance in their relationships with their subordinates because of their previous experiences with their former manager. They said that employees in a former job had a close free time relationship with their superior. The interviewee stated that the manager was pouring their emotions about their personal life problems on their employees, creating an uncomfortable working atmosphere for everyone. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

From the employee's point of view, the situation was perceived as unfair since they still needed to maintain respect towards their superior, even when the manager was having emotional outbursts. The interviewee says that the manager acted inappropriately and too informal toward them. As a manager, Interviewee 1 says they want to avoid this kind of situation, so they want to keep a certain level of formality in their relationships with their employees. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Some interviewees also stated that they had encountered individuals who completely lacked formal manners in their behavior toward others in their workplace. During their interview, interviewee 2 gave an example of an individual they had encountered acting overly

informally. This person's behavior affected their work performance. They think that this person lacked respect towards their work in general. To describe this so-called too casual person, they said that this individual acted like a regular friend. However, they somehow failed to remember that they were in the organization to work and did not respect their colleagues' time. This showed as an extension of completing their tasks and using friendly behavior to excuse themselves. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

In this situation, the interviewee realized that even though coworkers can be close friends, the workplace environment still urges them to act somewhat properly to maintain the seriousness of the work itself. This situation made them wish they were not friends with that colleague at the time, since the informal dynamic they had made the colleague use friendly behavior as a tool to avoid doing their job as they should have. Interviewee 2 believes that the colleague might not have used such excuses to slack off with their tasks if they were not friends. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

This harmful friendship dynamic experienced by interviewee 2 was not functional and caused stress among multiple coworkers. This example supports the research by Buunk, Doosje, Jans, and Hopstaken, in which they discuss the importance of reciprocity in informal workplace relationships. As stated by them, informal relationships at work, like other friendships, need reciprocity to be functional. The coworker in this example did not return the favors they received, even when it was their job to fulfill these tasks. In a workplace context, this kind of situation can cause harm to both employees and the organization. (Buunk, Doosje, Jans, & Hopstaken, 1993, p. 2)

Interviewee 1 described their experience working in an environment where the atmosphere was sometimes very toxic and filled with drama. They felt that this atmosphere had gone especially bad because of the lack of employer intervention in the issue. They described that their employer's attitude towards the inappropriate behavior of some employees was very passive. The employer even stated that they do not want to intervene in the social dynamics. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

This difficult social situation affected them and their colleagues negatively. A few workers considered looking for other jobs and leaving the company as soon as possible. The problem ended up causing a relatively high turnover of employees in the short term.

They describe the social atmosphere as informal and inappropriate since they experienced a lack of respect from their colleagues and other unprofessional behavior. They said the employer should have taken control of the situation by discussing the issue individually with the employees. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

They said that the friendships formed at the workplace with some people caused unequal treatment towards others which led to disrespectful and jealous behavior.

Some coworkers who spent time on their free time as friends had turbulent ups and downs in their relationships because of some outside work issues. When these people had drama about their free time topics, it negatively reflected their behavior at work. When they were happy with each other, they would gossip about others at work, but when these individuals got into arguments, they would gossip to other coworkers about each other. This toxic dynamic was stressful and frustrating for these people and everyone around them. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

They gave an example of the type of unprofessional behavior among the workers. There were situations where one worker mistreated their colleagues by asking them favors. When the favors were not always possible to fulfill, they proceeded to do actions that caused problems for other workers and the workplace itself. The situation was already challenging for other people at the workplace to handle. In addition, the manager chose to ignore this individual worker's behavior instead of confronting them. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 had an example where they discovered that some employees were friends and tended to talk disrespectfully about their other colleagues. As a manager, they noticed that employees talked down on a colleague. They shared opinions about this person's work results and talked about this person as if they were not an equal part of the work community in the company. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

In the illustration below, the author has collected the main benefits of formal relationships in the workplace. The effects on employees are listed on the left and the effects on the organization are listed on the right.
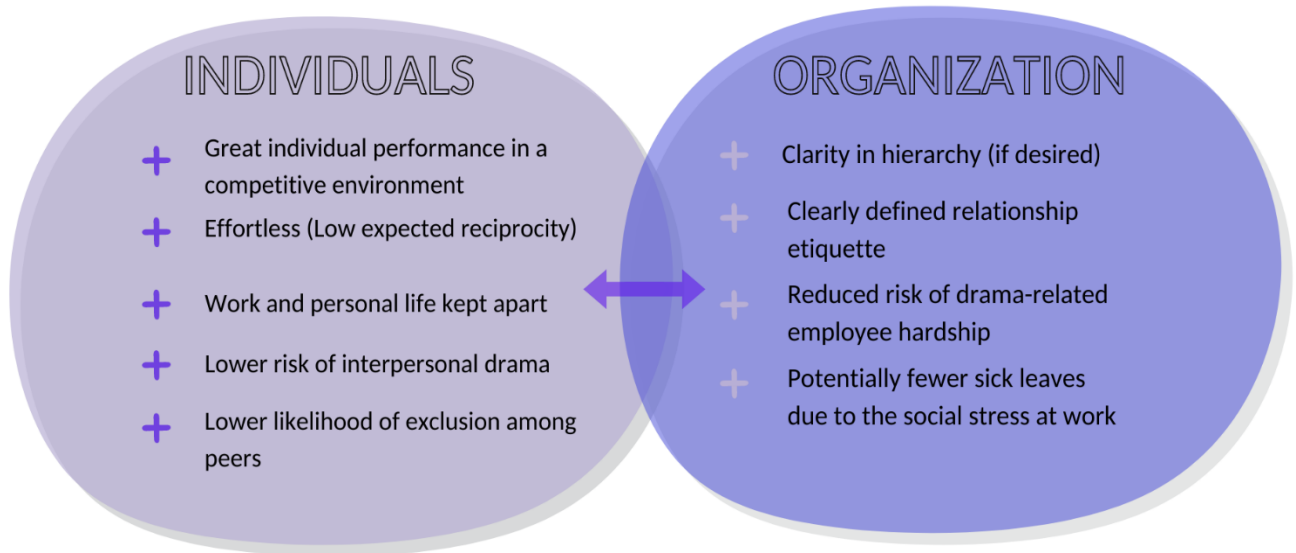

Figure 5: Summarized benefits of formal workplace relationships according to the interview data. [Author's own illustration]

4.3   Relationship with superiors

Most of the interviewees have noticed how relationships between superiors and subordinates can be a significant factor in organizational outcomes and individual well-being.

As mentioned, interviewee 1 also has experience in leadership positions in their current organization. The author wanted to hear more about their point of view as a manager, so they were asked additional questions about their manager experiences. The author wanted to hear what, if anything, is different in the relationships at work now since the promotion.

When interviewee 1 got promoted to a manager position, they felt that the relationship dynamic at work changed entirely. The coworkers they used to have an effortless and positive relationship with turned into subordinates, and the interaction with them turned cold, and the communication required additional effort. Quite recently, they also got

promoted to be responsible for a certain business location in the organization. They said it contrasted how relationships with these people at the workplace are now compared to how they used to be. They said they see a difference in how their former colleagues and current subordinates from customer service perceive them compared to those who have met them for the first time as their manager. They said their former customer service colleagues seem to feel safer around them and dare to disagree and say no more than those who have known them as a manager. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

However, they said that working with other managers has been great after the promotion. Even though these managers work in different locations, they have enjoyed that they get to work with people they relate to and who can support each other. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 4 has also witnessed a similar situation as interviewee 1. They mentioned that one of their coworkers had the experience of relationships shifting formal after getting promoted into a leadership position. They felt that their coworkers, who used to be their peers, started to distance themselves from this person in a leadership position because their relationship dynamic had changed and was not balanced anymore. They think that this really saddened the person in the newly achieved leadership position. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

The author finds that career progression and promotions really can affect the social dynamic at work. Unfortunately, sometimes someone's success might not be approved by everyone, or people might get intimidated by the amount of power a former peer acquires when they get promoted. After all, the promoted person is in power imbalance compared to the former peers.

Interviewee 2 gave an example of their relationship with their former manager. They said having this friendly, open relationship with their manager was precious since they felt it made communication seamless and direct. They were, for example, sharing details of their personal life, and with that information, the manager was paying attention and adapting the way to help them as an individual. They think that sharing details about their personal life could make it easier to do well at work since it is possible to discuss suitable solutions with the manager if there are some personal challenges. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

The author asked interviewee 1 about the nature of relationships the employees of their business location have with upper management. They said that the upper management had arranged socializing events where the employees and the management get to spend time together and therefore have a chance to get to know each other. However, the people from upper management are not generally present in individual business locations. Consequently, they have very little to do with the employees daily. Interviewee 1 finds that in large organizations the relationships between upper management and employees often remains too distant. They think that this could have also helped the upper management better understand the employees' struggles since they would have personally witnessed the kinds of problems the individuals in the business locations had. In addition, this could have also improved the employees' compassion towards the management since they would have seen the upper managers being present and interested in the issues even though they could not have helped much with their actions. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

The author asked how they feel about some workers having the safer feeling of disagreeing with them as a manager. They answered by saying that it has both positive and negative aspects. From the subordinate perspective, they feel that it is positive that the subordinates can talk openly to their manager. However, from the manager's point of view, it is not necessarily always leading to the most effective results for the company. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 told the author about a manager they worked for in the past. The interviewee described how this manager became too informal towards their employees. They said that this manager tended to let their emotions control them, and this person had emotional outbursts towards their employees. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

They said that as an employee, they were in an unfair settlement by having to watch out for how to react in these situations since they were in a lower position. However, at the same time, they thought the manager was acting very inappropriately and too informally toward them. As manager, they want to avoid this kind of situation, so they want to keep a certain level of formality in their relationships with their employees. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 4 said that they used to have a very formal relationship with their superior. Still, they said that it changed to a more informal relationship over time, and on the positive side, they think it also positively affected their communication. They like that part of being casual with the superior. Still, they found that there was also a negative effect to it. They said that the superior either knowingly or unknowingly started using this informal relationship to ask for favors from them in their free time. The interviewee felt obligated to answer their superior's phone calls even on the days when they were taking family trips. They thought that this was because they owed that to a friend. The superior was also asking them to work overtime. They think crossing the line like this is harmful to the work-life balance, and they would have wished that the superior would have respected their free time even though they are in casual terms as people. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

To conclude, all interviewees pointed out that in the end, the manager has a more significant responsibility to act professionally. It is also up to them to guide their subordinates to act respectfully towards others in problematic situations. It is unfair and much more difficult for a subordinate to step up and report their manager's behavior to the upper management and ending up in these situations should be strictly avoided. (Interviews 1,2,3,4, and 5)

4.4 Superior's contribution to social atmosphere at work

Interviewee 1 has witnessed poor social relations management from their former employer. Some employees were talking about their peers in a disrespectful way and brought their personal drama to work. Despite that this behavior affected everyone's mood at work negatively, the manager wanted to stay completely out of it. The manager's reaction towards this behavior was seen as favoritism since the manager encouraged other workers to ignore the unfair treatment of this one worker. This disregard made the other employees feel mistreated even though the manager remained nice to everyone. As a result, other employees felt unmotivated in their job, and they started practicing excluding behavior like gossiping as a cause of their frustration. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

In addition, this toxic workplace atmosphere led to more sick leaves among the employees. Furthermore, some of the employees experienced symptoms of stress and lack of motivation. These health-related issues led to further inconveniences for the employer and

other workers. The interviewee said the lack of leadership mainly caused this situation. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

During the interview, interviewee 1 wondered if an in-between informal and formal social atmosphere would have been optimal since they have experienced and seen the benefits and disadvantages. However, alternatively, they thought it could also depend on the manager's or employer's attitude towards the social atmosphere at work. They said that maybe with good leadership skills, a manager could successfully support the maintenance of healthy social relationships at work, whether formal or informal. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

The author also asked about their point of view as a manager on how they feel they should facilitate forming relationships at work between their subordinates. They said they had encouraged customer service workers to get to know each other and form positive relationships. As a manager, they said their motivation is to engage these employees in the company and contribute to their well-being. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 said that as a manager they do not want to support talking behind backs. They feel that by respectfully confronting their subordinates about gossiping and disrespectful talk about colleagues, they have made a difference in the social atmosphere for the better. Now that they are a supervisor, they find that it is their job to maintain an excellent social atmosphere and respectful treatment of everyone at work despite the differences in personal chemistry. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

4.5 Motivation

Interviewee 1 felt that their coworker relationship with the pair positively affected their motivation and excitement to go to work. They said they even felt competitive toward their colleague while simultaneously performing the same tasks. This positive competition caused them to remain excited and highly motivated in their work. (Interview 1, 28.04.2022)

Interviewees 1, 2,3, and 5 say that based on their personal experiences, would say that having friends at work can help them stay motivated. They brought up that healthy

competition and especially the physical presence of a friend at work boosts their excitement to perform well at work. (Interviews 1,2,3, and 5)

This could be connected to the study conducted by Kram and Isabella. They stated that the fact that coworkers are in frequent contact and work towards the same goals in the workplace could give individuals a better sense of competence and confidence in their professional roles. (Kram & Isabella, 1985, pp. 9-10)

This is possibly one of the reasons why the interviewees of this study have experienced that their motivation and performance have been enhanced. They feel safe around their friend and share their imperfections. Showing vulnerability helps people present each other authentically and therefore gives more credibility when they give feedback and encourage each other. Moreover, it is very motivating to receive encouragement from people who mean what they say. The author finds that there could be a connection between motivation and confidence, but this topic should be further examined in future studies.

Two of the interviewees stated that friendships at work might not always have positive effects on motivation. For example, interviewee 1 noted that if someone among the employees has a negative attitude, it is contagious and affects their peers. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

This was supported by interviewee 2, who thought that informal relationships could negatively affect their work performance and motivation for tasks if they had an unmotivated friend at work. They said a chain reaction could demotivate people and make them stick to performing only the bare minimum. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

Interviewee 5 also said that the whole team's motivation might sometimes be low since their social atmosphere is so friendly and uncompetitive. People are not judging each other for not performing optimally and sometimes colleagues easily get stuck talking about non-work-related topics together. (Interview 5, 17.6.2022)

However, the author finds it essential to note that the interviewees did not state that unmotivated friends at work are the only factor affecting their coworkers' motivation. They

mentioned these experienced adverse effects on motivation as examples based on their experiences. Both interviewees have experienced, that informal relationships with colleagues have also had a positive impact on their work motivation and say that their motivation is dependent on other factors such as fulfilling job and their satisfaction towards their organization.

4.6   Organizational commitment

The findings from the interviews supported Frone's theory of organizational commitment being connected to the relationships with superiors rather than peers. However, on a higher corporate level, one interviewee found that friendships positively affect their organizational commitment. This could indicate that as a person works in a higher position, the connection of the superiors as the company's representatives weakens. (Interview 1, 18.4.2022, Frone, 2000)

They said that even though working in the same team or organization as a close friend is nice, they do not think it significantly affects organizational commitment. For example, they would not let personal relationships be a significant factor when considering whether they should stay or leave their current position. They said that personally, it is not at the top of their priorities when thinking about factors that affect their organizational commitment. They noted that friendships or something that can be maintained in their free time even though someone would switch the organization they are working for. Above social relationships, they would prioritize factors like the job itself and the appreciation coming from the organization towards individuals. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

However, they have witnessed someone affected by a toxic relationship with the manager. They noticed that the negative relationship between an employee and a manager affected the employee's health. As a result, their stress levels increased, and they had sad emotions and cried at work. This mental pressure led to this employee's decision to leave the organization. It was also uncomfortable for others to witness this toxic relationship. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

When discussing organizational commitment, they interviewee 3 found that social relationships did not affect their decision on whether they would stay with this public sector position. (Interview 3, 4.5.2022)

Interviewee 5 on the other hand felt like their interest to commit to the public sector position relies a lot on the friendships they have formed at work. (Interview 5, 17.6.2022)

This view is shared by Interviewee 4, who thinks that close relationships with coworkers positively affect their organizational commitment. They say it is a significant factor when considering if they want to stay in the company. They said that they could even compromise on their salary or could do more boring tasks if they would have a pleasant and casual atmosphere at work. They even think it is easier to leave a company with formal, less meaningful relationships that would have the same or a bit higher range salary or similar or slightly more exciting tasks than a company where they have casual and comfortable relationships with coworkers. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

Interviewee 1 has witnessed how toxic work environment has been a factor in organizational commitment. This difficult social situation affected them and their colleagues negatively. A few workers considered looking for other jobs and leaving the company as soon as possible. The problem ended up causing a relatively high turnover of employees in the short term. However, they said this might have negatively affected the organizational commitment since the employees did not necessarily feel a strong sense of belongingness to their workplace. They said that bad days at work made them directly think of leaving this job because they lacked the emotional bond to it. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Based on the interviews, the author finds that there may be other factors that could co-effect organizational commitment together with workplace relationships. As said by Frone and based on interviewee 1's experiences, the relationship with the management of an organization can make a large impact on whether the employees see themselves keep working in there. However, Interviewees 1,4, and 5 have witnessed how the relationships with coworkers can affect organizational commitment positively and negatively. (Frone, 2000; Interviews 1,4, and 5)

During the discussion with interviewee 5, they mentioned that during their time in a private sector organization people were committed because the organization challenged them and gave them exciting opportunities. However, when they moved to the public sector, they feel like people there, including them, want to work there and do a good job because of the bond they have with their colleagues. Moreover, the author wondered how a relatively monotone job with no competition could keep the employees committed and motivated. Interviewee 5's opinion is that the job does not, but the peers do. They described that in a public sector position working toward the same goal with no competition glues them together and that many of their colleagues have known for several years. This similar positive effect was also recognized by interviewee 4. Based on the conversations with the interviewees and by looking into their career backgrounds the author found that this connection between organizational commitment, type of working environment and the nature of workplace relationships would be worthwhile for future research. These findings are introduced in the figure below.

Organizational commitment
Author's observation: Could depend on the type of job while also connected to the relationships

Exciting and/or uncertain position
➡ Connected to the quality of relationship with the organization or it's management

Monotonous and/or safe position
➡ Connected to the quality of relationship with the coworkers and the sense of belonginess

Figure 6: Organizational commitment affected by relationships in the organization tied to job-related circumstances. Based on the interview data.

4.7   Health of individuals

The interviewees were asked if they had experienced or noticed health effects on themselves or other individuals at their work that could be connected to social relationships at work. The purpose of the question was to hear their thoughts and observations, which did not necessarily have connections to diagnoses made by healthcare professionals. Therefore, it is essential to remember that all discussed health effects are not officially diagnosed.

Based on their experiences, formal relationships had little or no effect on individuals' health. Few of the interviewees stated that it is instead the lack of informal relationships that could make one experience adverse effects on their mental health. For example, interviewee 4 said they have experienced work overload, which is connected to a lack of friends at work. They think they would probably drown in work during busy times if they only had formal relationships with coworkers because asking for help from less close people feels more difficult. Thus, they find it much less likely to ask for support from formal colleagues even when they need help. They find that this situation has a risk of causing health problems like stress or burnout. (Interview 4, 5.6.2022)

Interviewee 5 brought up the same issue by saying that formal colleagues do not support each other in difficult situations, especially if the work environment is stressful and highly competitive. They said that especially when rewards like promotions are on the table, competitive people are ready to throw colleagues under the bus to highlight their own successful performance. Interviewee 5 says this is probably easier to do when employees do not have meaningful emotional bonds with their colleagues. (Interview 5, 17.6.2022)

According to interviewee 1, a toxic workplace atmosphere has led to more sick leaves among the employees. Furthermore, some of the employees experienced symptoms of stress and lack of motivation. These health-related issues led to further inconveniences for the employer and other workers. The interviewee said the lack of leadership mainly caused this situation. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

However, they have witnessed someone being affected by a toxic relationship with the manager. They noticed that the negative relationship between an employee and a manager

affected the employee's health. As a result, their stress levels increased, and they had sad emotions and cried at work. This mental pressure led to this employee's decision to leave the organization. It was also uncomfortable for others to witness this toxic relationship. (Interview 2, 28.4.2022)

According to interviewee 3's experiences, they would say friendly social relationships at work positively affect productivity and individuals' well-being. As an example, they gave the decreased need for taking sick leaves from work. (Interview 3, 4.5.2022)

Four interviewees brought up the toxic behavior of colleagues at work as a source of excessive stress. They said that only seeing someone being treated inappropriately was difficult for everyone around to see. (Interviews 1,3,4,5)

Talking behind people's backs and other mistreatment of peers was a reason for several adverse effects on the individuals' health. Interviewees described stress as one of the main negative health effects. Stress was stated to be a significant cause of short- and long-term sick leaves taken by the employees. (Interviews 1 and 3)

The interviewees witnessed stressed colleagues taking sick leaves diversely between mental health issues like negative emotions and depression and physical symptoms like skin rash and stomach issues. These symptoms can be connected to work-related stress, according to WHO. Still, in each situation, it is, in the end, the responsibility of the medical professional to determine whether the symptoms are a cause of stress. (World Health Organization, 2020 p. 14, Interviews 1 and 3)

4.8   Effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on workplace relationships

Based on the interviews, the pandemic has had diverse effects on individuals and organizations. While interviewees 1 and 3 have mostly found challenges in their personal experiences, interviewees 2, 4, and 5 stated that they had noticed more positive effects than negative ones. This could be explained by their approach to the topic during the interview. Interviewees 1 and 3 focused more on the organization-wide effects, while 2, 4, and 5 mainly focused on the impact on individuals.

Interviewee 1 said that not many new people came into the company during the pandemic, and the friendships that would have formed based on personal chemistry had already been created before the pandemic. However, they feel that the pandemic accelerated the formation of more surprising informal relationships. These relationships were more based on sharing mutual negative feelings caused by the pandemic and how their organization reacted to it. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

These informal relationships were not supportive but more like an inner circle where people shared their frustrations and dragged each other down. Especially the early times of the pandemic were complex and uncertain for everyone, and this seemed to make the employees form a hostile alliance towards the management and the employer. This alliance brought new challenges to the communication between managers and employees. They said that people naturally felt they needed someone to blame for these uncertain circumstances. Instead of blaming the pandemic, the employees tended to blame something closer and more approachable, which was the organization. Of course, the situation was difficult since the organization had nothing to do with these external circumstances, and it was difficult to provide fast solutions to improve. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 said that their promotion as a manager happened around the same time as the early times of the pandemic. They think the frustration of their employees was mainly aimed towards the employer and higher management of the organization rather than them as a middle manager. They felt they had been closer to the employees as a middle manager. So, when they decide to change something at the workplace because of the pandemic, they think they have successfully communicated the reasons behind the changes to the employees. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interviewee 1 said that the changes made by upper management have probably caused more frustration in employees because the upper management has failed to communicate the reasoning behind these decisions. As a result, the relationship gap between employees and upper management grew. As middle manager, they said that upper management should have made more contact and paid more attention to improving communication with their employees during these uncertain times. (Interview 1, 18.04.2022)

Interestingly, an enormous crisis such as the pandemic has brought people at work together just to form these alliances against the "common enemy." From the author's point of view, it is understandable that these people have aimed their frustration toward the management since the pandemic itself is such an abstract and unresponsive matter.

The change naturally causes uncertainty in everyone's minds, and they need a source of reassurance and support. For the employees, the source of support is naturally their superiors and the employer. Situations like this test the trust and relationships the employees have with their managers. Ideally, the change management should be well-planned and carefully implemented. In a situation where the change comes fast and unannounced from an external source, the superiors' leadership and communication skills are put to an enormous challenge. While trying to make fast solutions to improve the situations, supervisors might not realize or have time to communicate these changes and the reasoning behind them to their employees. This could corrupt the communication and trust between the employees and supervisors and, therefore, even distance their relationships.

As stated by Frone, conflict with superiors tends to affect the employees' relationship with the organization. The interviewees mainly said they have witnessed and experienced reduced job satisfaction. In this case, the conflict has not led to other adverse outcomes for external reasons. People are not happy in their job, but at the same time, the current situation with the pandemic limits their ability to look for another job. However, this uncertainty in the job market is temporary. Companies must improve their damaged relationship with their employees to regain their trust and not lose their valuable talents after a difficult time. (Frone, 2000, p. 3)

Interviewee 2 has found the pandemic to be a mainly positive experience when they think about the effects it has had on coworker relationships. Interviewee 2 even said that communication with coworkers is more effortless online and that they receive increased amounts of coworker support through quick calls online. (Interview 2, 28.04.2022)

The experience of interviewee 2 goes in line with Quan-Haase's and Wellman's research findings. As they already found in 2004, physical proximity might not be as essential for

coworker relationships to be functional and beneficial as previously thought. Interviewee 2 even stated that the change to move the primary communication at work online has allowed them to find new more effective ways of communication and information sharing. (Interview 2, 28.04.2022; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2004, p. 14)

4.9   Limitations of the study

Since workplace relationships and their connections to organizational outcomes and effects on employees are relatively seldomly researched topics, this thesis research is done with the acknowledgment that the findings can only be directive. Moreover, some of the major research is not recent, and therefore these theories might not be fully applicable anymore.

The topic of the thesis is a comparison of two very different types of relationships at the workplace and even though the effects of mentorships and superiors have been compared to the effects of peer relationships, the author finds that different types of relationships among peers have rarely been thoroughly compared. The author highlights that this topic has a lot of potential for future research and finds that especially the relationships among employees on the same level of the hierarchy are especially important topics for further research.

As mentioned earlier, it is essential to note that the former research findings conducted by other people do not have data from the same countries as this thesis. With that in mind, it could be further researched and evaluated if the data about the effects of workplace relationships could be generalized across country borders. The interviews for this thesis were done with people from different backgrounds in European countries. Therefore, the information in this thesis does not consider the possible factors that are affected by culture or location.

It is also important to acknowledge that for many of the discussed effects in this research, there are other influencing factors besides workplace relationships. Therefore, it can be challenging to determine how much interpersonal relationships have affected certain outcomes. For example, job satisfaction, motivation and organizational commitment are

known to consist of multiple factors. Mental well-being issues such as stress are also not necessarily only a consequence of the workplace social atmosphere.

5   Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to identify and compare the effects of formal and informal relationships in the workplace. Furthermore, the goal was to answer the research question; What are the effects of having official versus casual relationships between people in the workplace?

Based on former theories and the research conducted, the author suggests that superiors in companies should notice and acknowledge social relationships and their effects at work. The author finds it essential for managers and employers to know the impact of both formal and informal relationships among peers and between subordinates and superiors. Due to the significance of these effects on both organization and the individual employees, managers should evaluate what kind of social atmosphere they want to facilitate and be equipped to support healthy social relationships in their organization.

According to the findings in this thesis definition of a healthy social atmosphere can be partially tied to the context. While some people find that in some organizations staying formal and keeping the distance from coworkers is functional and beneficial, in some work environments forming a warm and friendly atmosphere is essential. Yet, it cannot be simply said that informal and formal social atmospheres always fit certain sectors of fields of profession.

Interestingly, despite the findings in some previous studies, this research suggests that also formal relationships among peers could be a positive outcome. The key benefits to support this finding are the ability to separate work from free time, the effortless nature of these relationships and the chance to focus on individual performance in a highly competitive environment.

According to the research data, especially the relationship and its depth between superiors and subordinates should be controlled by the superior based on their best consideration.

While there are many success stories, it often involves several risks to have a close personal relationship between people from different levels of hierarchy. Especially in conflict situation, the person lower in hierarchy is always in a more vulnerable and the superior must always be able to place personal matters aside to avoid mistreatment of their position. Furthermore, in conflict situations between peers the superior should be able to support the resolution of the conflict with a neutral and equally fair approach. Moreover, differences in superior's personal chemistry with their individual subordinates should never be a factor in decision making in any situation.

However, the research data suggests that employees could experience less stress in the communication to their superiors when the interaction is informal and relaxed. Yet, the author finds that informal communication is not equal to informal relationship. By allowing relaxed and spontaneous communication methods a superior still does not need to get personally involved with their subordinate. This is strongly supported by the interviewees, as the findings suggest that formal communication is less present and often non-beneficial in a day-to-day interaction with employees and their immediate manager.

When it comes to the relationships among peers, the author suggests that informal relationships are the most beneficial due to the emotional support and the sense of belongingness they can provide. However, employees should always consider that the personal relationships should not harm the performance of the tasks and that they should not lead to mistreatment and exclusion in the professional environment. Workplace is an environment where conflicts and relationship deterioration can lead into especially challenging individual and organizational outcomes since the circumstances often require the colleagues to continue working together. When severe or extended conflicts occur superiors should be equipped to find solutions to prevent and resolve these tough situations, since the negative outcomes can drastically harm the employees and the organization.

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Figures

Appendix 1: Questions of the Research Interviews

Questions:

1. Could you please tell me a bit about your career background?

2. Could you describe the social atmosphere you have experienced in your current or former position(s)?

3. Would you have examples of the situations where coworkers have supported other employees in an especially important way?

4. Would you have examples of situations where coworkers have affected other employees in a negative way?

5. What kind of effects on individuals/organizations have you noticed that have been causes of coworker relationships (of any nature)? Could you give examples?

6. Could you describe the level of formality in your communication with the people you work with?

7. How would you describe the kind of interaction you have with your coworkers during a day at work?

8. What about free time? Could you describe the nature of your relationship with your coworkers outside the work?

9. What are your experiences of employers' contributions towards a good atmosphere and relationships in the workplace? Would you have examples?

10. How would you say the covid-19 pandemic has affected the relationships with coworkers?

11. Would you have something else to say regarding this topic?

Appendix 2: Data processing plan

During the conducting of the interviews and the handling of the data, the author has followed the EU's Data Protection Regulation (General Data Protection (EU) 2016/679, 2016). The interviews were recorded by the author and all the interviewees were informed about it prior to attendance to the interview and the collection of any data. Every interviewee was asked for their consent to the of recording the interviews and if the recorded conversation during the interview could be used as data for the author's bachelor thesis. The recordings of the interviews are only accessible by the author of this thesis.

To make sure the interviewees and their current or former organizations remain unrecognizable, the author calls them simply interviewees with a number to differentiate them from each other. For example, the first person interviewed is called interviewee 1. Furthermore, recognizable information about the interviewees' current or former organizations or positions is not disclosed. The interviewees' job background is introduced by the professional field and the amount of work experience. Every interviewee's data is presented with the same level of anonymization.

After the finalization of the research, the interview recordings are deleted from the author's personal hard drive. They are not accessed by anyone else, and they will not be used as material for future research due to the sensitive nature of the data.